

## Using newsletters to create home-school connections

DEBORAH ANN JENSEN

doi:10.1598/RT.60.2.8

**T**eachers commonly use newsletters to keep parents informed of the events and dates of field trips or open house nights. Some may share what the children are doing in the classroom. These newsletters stop there as a form of one-way communication. How can newsletters be used to create a conversation? How can they enhance communication between the teacher and parent, and the parent and child? How can they be used to create a home-school connection?

Newsletters are often used in classrooms as a link between the school and home. Berger (1996) stated that the first step toward a successful partnership is communication and one way to establish a road to communication is through a newsletter. Too often, newsletters have not been seen as a strategy for fostering interpersonal communication. Communication in a newsletter is seen as one way, flowing from school to home. However, newsletters can be used to initiate interactive communication, and they hold benefits to the teacher, the children, and the parents.

### Teacher benefits

One of the teacher's most important missions is to help parents understand how children become readers and writers (Enz, 1995). Through the newsletter, teachers can proactively communicate information about the strategies being taught in the classroom. A newsletter can describe literature circles, what happens during independent reading time, or classroom practices regarding spelling. In the newsletter example in Figure 1, the teacher tells the parents which book the class will be reading

and explains the reading strategies they will be working on while reading the book.

Because many parents today do not have time to spend in classrooms, the teacher can keep parents in touch with the classroom environment through a newsletter. It can describe the writing or computer center, the children's work that can be found on bulletin boards, and how the classroom library is set up. By including samples of children's work, parents can get a feel of what is happening in the classroom without feeling left out, and the teacher benefits from the bridge the newsletter creates between home and school. In Figure 1, quotes from the children's writing are included. By sharing accomplishments, parents get a glimpse of what has been happening in the classroom.

Share with parents the author study of the month, and what the children are reading that is connected to science, social studies, or other curriculum areas. Specific books and themes can be mentioned. Home activities, websites, television programs, museums, or other places of interest that coordinate with topics the children are learning can be mentioned in the newsletter. "Although sending home some suggestions for activities to be done at home may sound like homework rather than communication, the right type of activity can result in interaction" (Berger, 1996, p. 181). Websites, poetry, dates to remember, and goals for math and social studies are included in the example in Figure 1, allowing the teacher to activate interaction between the child and parent around school-related topics.

Your newsletter can help draw out parents with knowledge or experience in the topic or theme being studied. By inviting those parents into the classroom to share, you acknowledge them as valuable

**FIGURE 1**  
**Sample class newsletter**



### April News

I hope that everyone had a wonderful long weekend! I want to say thank you to EVERYONE for attending Parent/Teacher Conferences. Class 1-2 was one of the only classrooms in the school that had 100% parent attendance! It means so much to me, as well as your child that you made that extra effort to come in and pick up their report card.

As we enter April it is hard to believe that we only have three months of school remaining. As I discussed with each of you at Parent/Teacher Conferences, it is crucial that each child leaves first grade in June reading forty words per minute. I plan to focus again on fluency this month, in hopes that by mid May every child will be close to our reading goal. Please continue to keep working hard with your child at home each night on both their power words, as well as reading fluently.

Thank you for your continued support-  
It makes a difference! Sara

### April Dates to Remember

April 6<sup>th</sup>- Trip to Theatre Works  
April 11<sup>th</sup>- PS 108 Awards Assembly  
April 25<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup>- SPRING BREAK



### April Web Sites

Check out our school report card at:  
<http://www.nycenet.edu/daa/SchoolReports/04asr/104108.PDF>

Now that the weather is nicer there are lots of great, free activities for kids to do in NYC: <http://www.nycgovparks.org>

The kids love Discovery Zone for Kids, there is some thing for every child's interest! <http://kids.discovery.com/>



### Share Your Profession With Your Child!

During the month of April we will be learning about community helpers. We will be talking about all types of jobs, ranging from police and firemen to nurses, teachers and construction workers. If you, or a member of your family has a job that is of service to the community please share information with your child about your job. You may want to allow them to interview you. You may also want to work together to write a short job description that they can bring in to share with us. We also welcome anyone that would like to come in and speak about their job with us- please let me know if you are interested!



### What will Junie B. Jones do next?

This month we will be reading Junie B., First Grader: One-Man Band together as a class. As we read we will be working on two new reading strategies, comprehension and retelling.

Each of these are strategies that your child will need to be able to demonstrate on the 1<sup>st</sup> grade New York City ECLAS test in June. To help your child build comprehension ask them questions about what they have just read. If you are not sure what types of questions you should be asking, refer to the list of comprehension questions that I handed out at conferences. To practice retelling simply ask your child to give you a detailed description of what they have just read. When retelling they should go in order of the story. Always have them start with what happened first, and finish with the last event.

Junie B. Jones also has her own web site! There are all sorts of fun activities that you may want to do with your child.

Visit Junie B. at: <http://www.randomhouse.com/kids/junieb/>

April 2005 News Letter, Class 1-2, p.1

### Look What We Did!



March is a month where first graders all of a sudden start to "blossom" into amazing readers and writers! Class 1-2 took some time to reflect back on their accomplishments from this year. Each child wrote about something they have learned how to do that they are proud of.

*I am proud of myself that I know how to spell stapler and light bulb the right way. Those are big words for me to spell!!*

*I always help my classmates and my teachers. I try to be responsible and I always try to get on Ms. G character tree.*

*I know how to read now. When I came to this school I did not know how to read a book. I always try hard and now I know how to read books!*

*I am proud that I always know how to write my ABC's all by myself. I can write my name too.*

*I am proud that I know how to zipper my coat and tie my shoes. My brother taught me to do that and now I know how to do it all by myself.*



### We Need Your Help!

We are learning about timelines in Math and Social Studies. We have learned that a timeline tells us when certain events occurred, and the order in which they happened. In class we have designed a timeline that displays activities we have done during each season of the school year. We also developed a timeline that tells when each of us was born.

Please work with your child at home to help them make their own individual timeline. The timeline should detail their life from the day that they were born to the present. You may include photographs, drawings or actual objects for each event. Please include at least five events. There should be at least a two sentence explanation as to what each event was and when it occurred.

Take a walk down memory lane with your child, I am sure that this is a project that you will both enjoy!

April 2005 News Letter, Class 1-2, p.2

contributors to children's learning. In this way the newsletter becomes a springboard for two-way communication between home and school. Knowing that she will be studying community workers with the class, the teacher had asked parents in a related field

to talk with their children about their job and had asked for volunteers to speak to the class.

Common family practices that support school learning can be acknowledged in newsletters. These include conversing about television

programs, reading to children, sharing family stories and recipes, as well as other home literacy events. Teachers can ask parents not only to share stories with their children, but also to send them to school in oral or written form so they become part of the classroom culture. An interview with a parent about his or her job as a community worker becomes a learning tool during the unit of study. The teacher is connecting what happens inside the classroom to the outside world.

For the teacher, the newsletter can inform efficiently. Rather than sending home a continual flow of notices, the newsletter can streamline information that needs to go home. The newsletter can value parents' contribution to the classroom and to the learning process as the teacher invites parents to make connections at home and to share their expertise in the classroom. A partnership is formed.

## Parent benefits

Parents have the opportunity to feel connected to their children's lives inside the classroom. By knowing what their children are learning in school, parents have the chance to open up conversations about what happened in school with specifics. They are in a better position to talk about the books their children are reading, the themes they are studying, and the progress of their writing. Home-school connections are a shared responsibility so parents must have access to information about school practices (McCarthy, 2000). Knowing that the class will be reading a book from the Junie B. Jones series by Barbara Park and having specific strategies for helping their child, parents have the opportunity to become more involved with their children's school learning.

By offering parents suggestions about websites to visit, activities to do at home, conversation topics that connect to readings, and books to share with children, parents feel a part of their children's learning and a source of support for their academic success. A message of dual support and mutual respect between the home and school is created when parents and teachers work together. In the newsletter example in Figure 1, the teacher shared a Junie B. Jones website with parents—making a direct connection to a book being read in the classroom—and also shared websites for parents to find

free activities to do with their children and a website to enhance children's interests.

By inviting parents to share their experiences and knowledge within the classroom, parents are not kept at the margins of their children's learning but feel involved. An important factor in student success is family involvement in a child's education, which is, in fact, more important than family income and education (International Reading Association, 2002). A newsletter creates the opportunity for parents to be involved at home and facilitates a feeling of connection to the classroom.

## Student benefits

When a partnership between the home and school is created, children see a mutual respect develop. Exchanges between the teacher and parent establish trust and lead to development of long-term relationships that provide a context in which learning can occur (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Berger (1996) found students are more successful and happier when communication is established. This can be seen during the unit on community workers.

Children benefit from a more personalized curriculum when teachers understand the students' cultural context. By inviting parents into the classroom, by opening up communication through the newsletter, teachers develop an awareness of students' broader sociocultural backgrounds. Books of interest, important cultural holidays, and sensitivity to family structure can be crucial to connecting home and school. Children, with the help of their parents, were asked to create individual timelines. When these products were brought to school, the teacher learned about the important family events in each child's home. Photographs, drawings, objects, and written explanations illustrated each student's life within the context of his or her home.

Having the newsletter available in languages other than English is a benefit to the teacher as well as to the family. According to McCarthy (2000) a key component in creating a partnership between the home and school appears to be the sharing of information. This can be difficult with parents who do not read English as their first, or sometimes second, language. Some schools are fortunate in having a parent coordinator or parent advocate who can

translate the newsletter or who knows of a community resource for having the newsletter translated into the primary language of the home. Websites, such as <http://babelfish.altavista.com/tr> will translate up to 150 words at a time, but sometimes the translation is not sensitive to idiomatic expressions and other nuances of the languages involved. Sharing the newsletter with the class and reading it together before it is sent home allows the opportunity for the child to become familiar with the newsletter. The child is then able to translate or retell the contents of the newsletter with his or her family.

## The newsletter as a teaching tool

By reading the newsletter with the class before it is sent home, the teacher has the opportunity to alert the class to upcoming lessons and academic goals. The newsletter can also help to summarize what learning has recently occurred and how that learning is connected to future learning.

The newsletter can continue to teach topics outside the classroom. By including websites, book lists, community resources, and activities that enhance classroom learning in the newsletter, children have the opportunity to extend their learning and interests. Often the teacher does not have the time to delve as deeply as she would want into a topic or have the chance to give the topic the breadth she would like.

Having students be responsible for part or all of the newsletter requires that they write, reread, revise, and edit with purpose. It also requires students to navigate through different software programs to create the newsletter. Attention to font, layout, what information to include, and what information to eliminate requires active, purposeful thought from the students.

## Creating newsletters to springboard communication

Here are some suggestions for the creation of a newsletter. Keep in mind that the newsletter should be a catalyst for increased communication.

1. Newsletters should be written in a warm, respectful, and caring tone. They are well received if they are reader friendly and avoid educational jargon. Common language is easy to read and to understand.
2. Consider the format. Pay attention to font and design. It should be a simple layout. Boldface and italic print as well as different colored headlines can draw attention to different sections of your newsletter. Include graphics, or scan in student work or photographs to make it more interesting and reader friendly. Consider using a publishing software program.
3. Include student work and have the children help with newsletter construction. Inclusion of children's work gives children pride and ownership in the newsletter and they are more likely to share it with their parents when they have helped with the construction. Parents are more likely to read the newsletter knowing that their children's work was included. In this way the newsletter also becomes a vehicle for parent-child discussion.
4. The newsletter is a bridge for communication between parent and child, so include websites they can use together. Suggest books they can read together or projects the parent and child can cooperatively accomplish.
5. Keep parents abreast of classroom activities and units of study. Not all parents have time to spend in the classroom. The newsletter should keep them in touch so they don't feel left out.
6. Find a way for feedback. This could be a simple note or family journal entry about a parent-child activity tried at home, a book they shared, or a trip they took. It can be a response to an invitation to help in the class or chaperone a field trip. Parents may be invited to share a personal experience, memory, or folk tale to be sent in with the child when they cannot come into the classroom themselves. A tear-off portion within the newsletter inviting comments, questions, or concerns may work for some parents.

7. Consider your audience. Think of the needs of the parents and what information would be most useful to them inside your classroom. Don't neglect parents who do not speak English. You might need your newsletter translated so all parents can read it and be a part of the classroom. There might be parents who would be more apt to read the newsletter if it was sent to them online.

## Successful home-school partnerships need communication

Newsletters effectively and efficiently inform parents of the academic life of the classroom. Describing classroom literacy practices, author studies, books, and themes, and then connecting them to the students' home lives can initiate many home-school connections. Drawing on students' lives outside the classroom and bringing them into the curriculum helps bridge home and school learning. It opens the opportunity to dialogue with parents.

The first step in successful home-school partnership is communication. Involving parents is largely dependent on teacher initiative. It is the teacher who opens the door and invites the parent into the world of the classroom. A teacher-initiated newsletter invites communication, acknowledges family events, and can invite an understanding of events in the classroom. The teacher needs to think

about the physical design and topics to include, explain classroom and school events and policies, and consider how to bring the world outside of school into the classroom. "Education is a very human partnership. It depends for its strength, to a great degree, on how teachers and parents feel about each other and what they do to meet each others' needs" (Preece & Cowden, 1993, p. 7).

**Jensen teaches at the City University of New York's Hunter College. She may be contacted there (Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Hunter College, City University of New York, 695 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10021, USA). E-mail [djensen@hunter.cuny.edu](mailto:djensen@hunter.cuny.edu).**

### References

- Berger, E.H. (1996). Communication: The key to parent involvement. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 23, 179-182.
- Enz, B.J. (1995). Strategies for promoting parental support for emergent literacy. *The Reading Teacher*, 46, 168-170.
- International Reading Association. (2002). *Family-school partnerships: Essential elements of literacy instruction in the United States* (Position statement). Newark, DE: Author.
- McCarthy, S.J. (2000). Home-school connections: A review of the literature. *Journal of Educational Research*, 93, 145-153.
- Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31, 132-141.
- Preece, A., & Cowden, D. (1993). *Young writers in the making: Sharing the process with parents*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.